

Masterpieces on U.S. Stamps: The Works of Mark Rothko



Marcus Rothko, 2nd from the right in 1912.

On September 25, 1903 Latvian-American painter Marcus Rothkowitz was born in Daugavpils, Latvia (formerly Dvinsk, Russia). After leaving Russia in 1913 the Rothko family emigrated to the United States and settled down in Portland, Oregon. From 1921 until 1923 Mark Rothko studied at Yale University, thanks to a scholarship he received. After his schooling he moved to New York City where in 1925 he met and studied under Max Weber at the Art Students League. Just three years later Rothko participated in his first group exhibit.



On the left is a work of art by Max Weber. On the right is Rothko's, "The Cat and the Canary" done in a similar style to Weber.

Progress Administration (WPA) Federal Art Project (FAP). The FAP was a way to get unemployed artists back to work. For eight years a broad range of artisans, all with different levels of experience and working in a variety of mediums, were producing art, with over 5,000 artists working in 1936 alone. The art that came about as a result of this project was distributed all over the U.S. in an effort to spread artistic expression to areas where it had previously been absent.



Rothko's Self Portrait, completed during his time with the FAP project.

In the early 1940s Rothko began to develop a style more mythical in nature, containing flat shapes with a feel of primitive art (left). By the time the mid 1940s rolled around his paintings began to take on



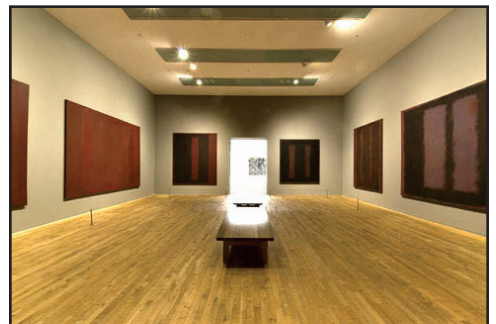
a more surrealist approach, making Rothko's works from this time period his subconscious creations (right). From here he began to include some of his signature colored rectangles for which he would later become famous.



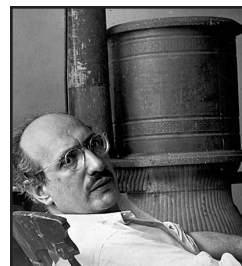
Rothko began to develop his mature style of rectangles containing meditative silence and experimented with the interplay of colors. In 1958 he received his very first commissioned job. The work would consist of a series of murals for The Four Seasons restaurant in New York. The murals, however, were never placed



One of the murals originally painted for the Four Seasons in the restaurant. Rothko felt that his intense paintings would be misplaced and lost in the background of a gourmet eating establishment. Instead he donated the paintings in 1960 to the Tate Gallery in London, while they now hang in Tate Modern. One year after making his donation Rothko was given a solo exhibit at the prestigious Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York and in 1962 he completed his murals for Harvard University.



The Rothko Room at Tate Modern.



Rothko in his 53rd St. studio in New York in 1953.

A very important year in Mark Rothko's life was 1964, when he was commissioned to paint a set of murals for an octagonal shaped chapel at the University of St. Thomas in Houston (photo, page 27). The paintings, which were completed in 1967 had to be installed through the skylight by a crane for they were too big to fit through the door. The largest of the murals measures fifteen feet by nine feet. The paintings consisted



of sharp, black rectangles painted over a muted rust-red background with a slight red border left showing. It is believed that Rothko was experimenting with both color and the subtle differences in surface quality. Here he went beyond challenging one's perception of color by also playing with the viewer's understanding of borders.

Physically ill and suffering from depression, Rothko committed suicide on February 25, 1970, just one year before the chapel was inaugurated in his name. At the time of his death, he was widely recognized in Europe and America for his crucial role in the development of nonrepresentational art.

Since his untimely passing many of Mark Rothko's works have gone up for auction, some of which have sold for astounding amounts of money. On May 15, 2007 the history of the art market was forever changed, with lot 31 of the Sotheby's auction, "White Center (Yellow, Pink and Lavendar on Rose)" (right). The painting completed by Mark Rothko in 1950 was predicted to sell for 40 million dollars. It instead



realized 72.84 million dollars when it was purchased over the telephone by the Sheik of Qatar. This purchase set a world record for the artist and for the world's most expensive work of art. Another of Rothko's works is, similar in nature to the painting titled No. 12, which is featured in the 1998 U.S., "Four Centuries of American Art" set of 20 stamps. The similar work called No. 15 (left) sold this past May at auction for 50.4 million dollars.



His vibrant, veils of color asserted the power of nonobjective painting to convey strong emotional and spiritual content. With an unwavering commitment to a single artistic vision,

Mark Rothko celebrated the power art holds over the creative imagination.